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Civil War Soldier interred at St. Paul's served three years with "old steady" 128th New York Infantry

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Like thousands of Civil War soldiers, Jacob Ham fought for three years in the great national conflict (and sometimes cooked), returning to his home town and resuming the rural life he had interrupted, living into his mid 80s, when he was interred at St. Paul's cemetery.

Monument to the 128th Infantry, in Poughkeepsie, NY.

Ham served as a private in the 128th New York Volunteer Infantry, recruited from the Hudson River Valley counties of Dutchess and Columbia. Nicknamed "old steady," the unit experienced sharp combat in a wider variety of settings than many New York regiments, battling Confederates in Louisiana, Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas, losing more than half their original strength while helping to achieve Union victory. President Lincoln's call for "300,000 more" volunteers in the summer of 1862 animated the imagination and patriotism of young men in upstate counties. Along with friends and neighbors in the rural town of Ancram, Columbia County, on the eastern shore of the Hudson River, the 22-year-old Ham enlisted in Company G of the newly formed 128th on August 13, 1862. Pledging to serve three years, he left the farm where he lived with his parents and three younger sisters. Recently married, Ham also bade goodbye to his pregnant wife Melinda, 17, who delivered their first child, a boy named John, in early 1863, while the private was at the front.

In scenes reflected across the North, Ham joined the regiment in camp at the City of Hudson, enjoying afternoon tea provided by the ladies of the town. A captain with West Point credentials drilled the recruits, and flags were presented by women from both counties represented in the regiment. A local woman penned an original fight song, which called for "*Death to traitors who would sever What the Lord has joined together; Let their name and memory wither, Hail, the Stars and Stripes."* During training at Camp Kelly, the blue wool uniform was fitted on the lean, 5'9" farmer, and the awkward kepi foraging cap was tugged over his black hair, while his grey eyes grew accustomed to looking out from under the low, slanted brim. After a short training period, the unit departed on September 5, with a parade through the streets, equipped with new haversacks still smelling of varnish, loaded with rations of bread, pork, and "a big onion."

Transported by steamer down the Hudson, "the jewel of American scenery," according to the regimental history, the troops reached New York City and eventually Baltimore, where they were issued Enfield rifled muskets.

In December 1862, the soldiers from the Hudson Valley boarded ships for a much more dangerous journey to the Gulf of Mexico where they participated in the critical campaign to reassert control of the Mississippi River. This was an uncommon assignment for a New York regiment, which generally remained in the eastern or Virginia theatre of the war. They resisted deployments to the Gulf because of fears of malaria, typhoid and other diseases; additionally, for logistical reasons, these armies were usually filled with units from the Northwest. Certainly more troops were needed for the lower South sector, but the dispatch of the 128th perhaps also reflected an absence of political connections to avoid such service.

They remained in Louisiana for a year and half, slugging it out sometimes in swamps and riverbeds in two of the tougher engagements of the war, separated by periods of garrison duty in Baton Rouge. Attached to General Nathaniel Banks' Department of the Gulf, the 128th assaulted the Mississippi River base of Port Hudson in the spring and summer of 1863, suffering heavy casualties, including their colonel, David S. Cowles, although "old steady" observed the surrender of the position on July 9, completing Union control of the Father of Waters. The New Yorkers also campaigned in the spring 1864 Red River expedition, among the more pronounced Union failures, which attempted to command more of Louisiana and carry the Federal banner into Texas. The 128th helped guard the Union line of retreat after a major Confederate victory, and constructed a dam to help save Union ships, sustaining considerable losses.

Private Ham's role in this fighting is difficult to distinguish; he was one soldier in a regiment of 1,000 men, although he was present at both the Port Hudson and Red River fighting, without sustaining injuries and avoiding capture. A curious note in his service record lists Ham as the cook for Company G, which probably meant his culinary abilities were discovered by the captain, and he was assigned to prepare meals for nearly 100 soldiers. While he fulfilled combat roles, standing over the large metal pots stirring stews or soups likely excused him from guard duty or other fatigue chores.

In July 1864, the regiment swung back north, reaching Virginia to join General Phil Sheridan's campaign to destroy Confederate resistance and eliminate use of the Shenandoah Valley as a supply base. The New Yorkers were among the regiments initially swept up in a Confederate charge on the morning of October 19 at the Battle of Cedar Creek, where many of the soldiers were captured, although an afternoon counterattack produced a major Union victory. The 128th was ordered to Savannah, Georgia in January, and in March the men from the Hudson Valley shifted to North Carolina, where Ham participated in General William Sherman's Carolina campaign until Confederate General Joseph Johnston's surrender April 26. Completing an exhausting season of fighting, the New Yorkers returned to Georgia and mustered out in Augusta, July 12, 1865, a few weeks later than most units.

Had the war changed him? Outwardly, he returned to his wife Melinda and resumed the likely trajectory of his life if there had been no Civil War, living another 60 years, which would certainly indicate there were no serious physical injuries. There is little suggestion of any emotional or adjustment fallout; but there must have been enormous pride at surviving his ordeal, stories to tell his children and neighbors, and, despite the hardship of war, a sense of adventure for a man who other than 1862-65 very possibly never left the Hudson Valley.

By 1870, still identified in the census as a farmer, Ham and Melinda lived in the same town in Columbia County with five children, four of them born after the war. Ten years later, the veteran and Melinda had nine children, Jacob was working as a blacksmith, and two of his teenage sons were employed in a cotton mill, an intrusion of the industrial revolution onto the rural landscape of Ham's childhood. In 1910, following Melinda's death, the old soldier had remarried a younger woman and fathered two additional daughters, still living in Columbia County.

The former "old steady" private moved to Mt. Vernon around 1920, following the death of his second wife, and lived his final years with his granddaughter Alta and her husband Harold Treuer, an engraver, on Union Lane, near St. Paul's, a common pattern before assisted living facilities or nursing homes. He died on November 7 1925, at age 85, after a lingering illness, survived by seven of his 11 children. Interment at St. Paul's followed days later in the section of the cemetery used by Mt. Vernon as a municipal graveyard, his final resting spot marked by a simple soldiers' stone.